

Storm over Coast Guard's role clouds homeland security debate

06/26/02

By Jill Zuckman

Chicago Tribune

When President Bush warned against turf battles engulfing his proposal for a new Department of Homeland Security, he might well have been worrying how fans of the venerable U.S. Coast Guard would react.

The answer: Not well. The fight over the Coast Guard, founded in 1790 to collect customs at sea, is perhaps the most dramatic example of the battles under way as Bush tries to reorganize the federal bureaucracy to better protect the nation from terrorism. Agencies that handle everything from visas to animal inspections to scientific research are scheduled to be absorbed into the new department, raising concerns across America that their primary missions could be undercut.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats and Republicans from the House to the Senate are in a frenzy over where in the federal bureaucracy the Coast Guard should reside. They also are fretting about whether the guard would retain its mandate to rescue fishermen, catch drug smugglers, clean up oil spills and stop foreign fishing vessels from poaching in American waters while at the same time preventing terrorists from invading the nation's ports.

Some lawmakers have gone so far as to suggest that the Coast Guard be split in two, with a security branch in the new department and a safety branch remaining in the Department of Transportation. Others have said they could accept the move to the Department of Homeland Security if the Department of Transportation could still oversee certain functions. Yet others have said it does not matter where the Coast Guard falls within the government, as long as it gets more money.

"Before we jump off the bridge, it's important we know how deep the water is," said Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which oversees the Coast Guard. "I'm not going to be railroaded into supporting an unworkable bill."

Young already has begun lobbying his colleagues in the House to keep the Coast Guard under the Department of Transportation. With an expensive transportation bill coming up next year, lawmakers looking for highway and bridge projects may not want to cross him.

Indeed, the Coast Guard has numerous and powerful allies on Capitol Hill, particularly those from states bordering the oceans and Great Lakes.

"The mission of the Coast Guard literally involves a matter of life and death for our fishermen," Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) said.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said she is worried that Coast Guard duties not involving homeland security, such as rescuing sailors on Lake Michigan, could get short shrift under the new mission.

"The Coast Guard has been enormously valuable to us," said Schakowsky. "We want to make sure that the functions performed for the City of Chicago don't get second-class status if and when it's rolled into a new department."

Tom Ridge, the director of the Office of Homeland Security, has heard from Schakowsky, Collins, Young and others during his testimony before Congress this week and last.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), for example, plans to question Ridge closely Wednesday at a Judiciary Committee hearing on what Kennedy considers to be insufficient funding for the Coast Guard's enormous new responsibilities.

Moreover, Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), the ranking member on the powerful Appropriations Committee, has lectured Ridge in public and in private.

"It took us 20 years to get the foreign nations out of our waters and to restore the capability of protecting the reproductivity of the fisheries off our shore," Stevens told Ridge.

"If the result of this legislation is to take the Coast Guard off of that mission, to deny us the ability to maintain the boats that are necessary to assure the fisheries patrol, we would lose the largest biomass of fish that has the greatest productivity for the future of the world."

Though lawmakers are unified in their concern for the Coast Guard, there is little consensus on where it belongs in the hierarchy.

Some members of Congress had in recent years proposed that the Coast Guard be part of the Department of Defense. Before it was shifted in 1967 to the new Transportation Department, the Coast Guard was in the Treasury Department.

James Lewis, director of the technology and public policy program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said it took at least 10 years to reorganize the military and create a Department of Defense after the idea was raised in 1943. A decade later, President Dwight Eisenhower was still tinkering with the flow chart.

"The odds of us getting this totally right in the first place are zero," Lewis said. "None of this is going to be easy, and the Coast Guard part is the hardest to bite off."

Adm. Thomas Collins, commandant of the Coast Guard, said his agency wants to move under the jurisdiction of the new department, where it would dwarf the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Customs Service, among

others.

"The time is now for some organizational adjustment, and I support that," Collins said.

What he doesn't want is to divide the Coast Guard between Cabinet departments.

"I think that is the worst outcome that could possibly happen," Collins said, explaining that Coast Guard cutters perform multiple tasks that cannot be separated.

"It's bad stewardship and it's a very bad business case to pull us apart," he said, describing the idea as "a fall-on-your-sword issue." And he said the Coast Guard's traditional missions will not fall by the wayside.

House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) provided little assurance to Young during a private meeting Monday that the Coast Guard would stay in the Department of Transportation.

"I don't think there is any member of Congress who would want to see the traditional mission of the Coast Guard diminished," Armey said. The best he could offer Young, however, was to say that "no one means anyone any harm in this process."

Young, meanwhile, is not backing down. He doesn't like the homeland security bill, and he's annoyed that the president keeps minimizing his concerns by talking about turf wars.

"When I was at the White House I told him not to do that," said Young, whose home state of Alaska makes up half the nation's coast line. "That's not his business."